Achieving the Promise: Montgomery College's Bold Next Steps

By now you can appreciate the complexities of closing the achievement gap (CTAG) or—as I will now refer to it—Achieving the Promise! We have measured it, theorized around it, and studied best practices for remedying it. Now we are ready to act. I am proud and excited to present implementation steps designed by our CTAG Implementation Team (CTAG-IT). I feel confident that our thoughtful, evidence-based approach will help the College chip away at the impediments that have hampered the success of our students. As you read about these measures, I hope you will recall that the needs cannot be explained by one single variable, although one may be more or less pronounced in the experience of an individual student. Rather, the issues may be thought of as a culmination of multiple, sometimes nuanced variables, that accumulate to impede student progress. To the extent that we can systematically remove such barriers, I believe in my heart that students can and will succeed. To that end, MC is ready to take several bold, first steps.

Help Students Make Progress

Creating a *team* that will coordinate the implementation of the recommendations collegewide is essential to supporting programs aimed at

achieving the promise. With the leadership of a dedicated director and a cadre of faculty fellows, the team will help address four categories of activities:

- faculty development,
- advising and mentoring,
- diversifying the faculty and staff, and
- partnering with community groups.

The team will be formed as soon as possible, with timing and structure dependent on FY16 budget considerations. An advisory committee to guide the team will also be established with participants from MC and the community actively collaborating. The committee will partner with national organizations such as Excelencia in Education in order to benchmark our progress.

Since ample evidence suggests that a seamless transition from high school to college is one variable that correlates with academic success, MC will partner actively with two groups established by the Montgomery County Public Schools' Office of Community Engagement to strengthen the pipeline of students entering MC. One of MCPS's closing the achievement gap action groups specializes in issues facing Latino/a students and the other focuses on issues confronting African American students.

Since student mentoring is widely considered to be an effective tool for increasing academic success and persistence, MC will establish a comprehensive, collegewide mentoring program. New African American and Latino/a students will be actively recruited to participate. Mentors will be drawn from MC faculty, staff, and alumni, and will be specially trained to provide guidance and structure to students who participate. Additionally, special attention will be given to mentoring new faculty in order to increase their success rates and make the College more attractive to minority scholars.

Student mentoring will undergo a large-scale transformation to make the process more "intrusive," more mentor-driven, and more comprehensive. A thorough analysis will be conducted of all existing mentoring programs on all three campuses and WD&CE in order to identify any gaps and scale up programs that are already working successfully. Active, productive programs will be scaled up. Eighty volunteer faculty, staff, and administrator mentors will be recruited to work with student mentees. Additionally, project leaders will be identified to serve as mentors and oversee the operations of the programs. Mentors and project leaders will be trained on how to successfully integrate themselves into students' academic lives, to navigate student policy issues and to measure outcomes. Planning will begin this year towards longer-term goals including a student-advisory group on mentoring, more appropriate use of technology in mentoring, a pilot program for major-specific mentoring, and additional training opportunities for faculty and staff mentors. Within academic departments, advising will be conducted by instructional faculty, with guidance from training modules.

Accessing financial aid will be made easier and timelier by several strategies. Student outreach will be enhanced to build awareness of loans and scholarships by increasing the number of financial aid information sessions scheduled before the state of Maryland deadline, and by including FAFSA information in student welcome packages. County high schools with larger percentages of students receiving free and reduced meals will be targeted for increased, personalized financial aid application assistance. Additionally, the My MC portal will provide a "How to Access Financial Aid" link, and MC Financial Aid TV will be promoted as a tool for better understanding the process and deadlines. To further incentivize students to complete their financial aid packages on time, early applicants will receive the maximum grant and scholarship funds through the College. In order to prepare high school applicants more thoroughly, a mandatory financial aid plan will be required prior to New Student Orientation.

We will also identify courses that are roadblocks for large numbers of African American and Latino/a students and target them for effective interventions. Using data reporting and

tracking tools, we hope to increase the number of successful interventions in these critical courses, helping students past an essential hurdle that has contributed to breakdowns in academic persistence.

Create a More Diverse Campus

Research has shown that achieving the promise depends on several factors that are closely connected to faculty diversity and to attitudes towards cultural competence on campus. Therefore, we will examine and strengthen our processes to recruit minority faculty as well as strengthen our efforts to build and maintain a climate with deep respect for cultural differences. In an effort to recruit more African American and Latino/a faculty and staff, we will continue to strategically advertise all openings in appropriate media and train search committees on how to generate diverse applicant pools. We will solicit feedback about methods and professional development that would allow faculty to engage students more thoroughly in mentoring roles. Finally, we will strengthen our cultural competency training for employees that focuses more directly on achieving the promise and makes classrooms more comfortable and relevant for minority students. This training will serve one of many efforts to communicate MC's commitment to having a workforce that reflects and supports our student population.

Engage the Surrounding Community

Partnerships with the community can lend considerable support to our achieving the promise efforts. By drawing potential students into the campus and linking current students to opportunities outside the campus, students are exposed to educational, professional and scholarship opportunities, which can propel them toward achievement. Research has shown that K–12 students who visit the campus at some time are more likely to envision college in their future and to enroll when the time comes. To further this dynamic, we have established two community engagement centers—one in Gaithersburg and one in the eastern region of the county—that will directly engage residents to enhance access. Our community engagement

staff will participate in at least 40 public events this year, connecting with key African American-serving and Latino-serving organizations. Similarly, we will create a Community Engagement Roundtable to help the College identify systemic changes to better serve student populations who are not excelling. Cultivating such partnerships nurtures the allegiance that community members feel toward the College mission, and the likelihood of continued collaboration. Similarly, we will encourage community businesses and organizations to partner with us on College events, such as open houses and scholarship fairs. Since financial hardship continues to be an obstacle faced by many of our students, we will research funding and planning for a "One Stop" social service center at the College.

Systematically Record and Analyze Data

At my State of the College Address earlier this month, I introduced the College's new Student Success Score Card. This new tool speaks to the expectation made in our mission statement that we will hold ourselves accountable. The Score Card contains the most important indicators about student progress and completion at Montgomery College with data that is disaggregated by race, gender, and age. This will allow the College community—as well as the community at large—to see how our students are doing and then to take actions that make a difference. The data will serve as a baseline for measuring successful outcomes in future years and to benchmark our own long term goals. The approach will also help the College to identify initiatives that are proving effective, and determine if they may be used successfully in other disciplines.

In addition, we will add resources to our library guides, including the interactive software *LibGuides* that provides usage statistics and links to articles and reports so that faculty and staff can stay current in the research and literature on the topic.

A related step will be to carefully track the outcomes of interventions that are already in place for African American and Latino/a students. Measuring the outcomes of programs currently

active on the campus—Boys to Men and Sister 2 Sister, for example—adds to our arsenal of promising practices and our understanding of their strengths. New programs will also be carefully evaluated for their rate of success with students, faculty and staff being given the tools they need to design accurate, reliable metrics.

Conclusion

Thoughtful planning is an essential element to any successful campaign. With this implementation plan, I believe we have constructed a roadmap that is ambitious but achievable. We have put in place the metrics we need to assess our progress and the timeline necessary to move forward with appropriate urgency. Throughout the process we have reached out to include the voices of people from different positions at the College and to maximize the assets we already have. Where necessary, we have conscientiously partnered with community members with whom we share common goals. I am grateful to the CTAG Implementation Team for its comprehensive and detailed recommendations. I have no doubt that this plan will propel us to substantial progress in the important work of achieving the promise.

Discussion Questions

1. What information stands out for you in this report?
2. How can Montgomery College and its community partners encourage and support African American and Latino/a students?
3. What elements of institutional culture create the environment in which achieving the promise is actualized?